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The Coming Showdown on Central America

The following article is based on reporting by Philip Taubman and Martin Tolchin, and was written by Mr. Taubman.

WASHINGTON

THE Reagan Administration and Congress, like two heavyweights measuring one another in the early rounds of a fight, have so far traded jabs over Central America policy but managed to avoid a damaging brawl. As lawmakers returned to work last week after the Easter recess, it was clear that their accumulated doubts were leading to a more intense conflict in which Congress was prepared not only to challenge Administration policy but to use the power of the purse to change it.

"After two years of uneasy but workable relations between the President and Congress on Central America," a senior Defense Department official said, "we're obviously headed into a more difficult period in which Congress will increasingly assert itself."

Immediately at issue were two linked essentials of the Government's policy — military aid to El Salvador and covert intelligence operations targeted against Nicaragua. Neither involved great expenditures of money by Federal standards. The Administration last month proposed an emergency \$110 million military assistance program for El Salvador for the fiscal year that ends in September, with \$60 million to be made available immediately by diverting funds marked for other countries. The exact cost of the covert operations is classified, but security officials estimated the bill for the current fiscal year totals about \$20 million, with roughly the same amount proposed for next year.

But in Congress both issues raised basic questions about the wisdom, efficacy, and at least in the case of the covert activities in Nicaragua, the legality and morality of the Administration's strategy for limiting Soviet and Cuban influence in Central America. The message coming from Capitol Hill seemed to be: We share your desire to stop the spread of Communist involvement in Central America but we question your means and fear that they may draw the United States into more direct military involvement in the region. Specifically, there was growing anxiety that Administration policy had placed too much emphasis on security assistance and covert military operations and

too little on efforts to find negotiated solutions to the region's conflicts. There also seemed to be concern about moral consistency.

That apprehension was most forcefully expressed by Representative Jim Leach, Republican of Iowa, who said, "U.S. actions against Nicaragua undercut the moral imprimatur upon which U.S. policy in El Salvador is based. In El Salvador we stand foursquarely against those who are armed and financed from abroad and who would shoot their way into power. In Nicaragua we stand foursquarely with such forces and are in fact the financiers of anarchy."

These concerns, expressed in the debates over military aid to El Salvador and covert operations in Nicaragua, produced nothing but trouble for the Administration. The military aid request was in so much danger last week that the Administration decided to delay consideration of the measure. "Right now, if we put this before the subcommittee it would lose," said Representative Clarence D. Long, chairman of a House foreign operations subcommittee. Mr. Long, a Maryland Democrat, added, "It would be a public vote and I think the outcry against any money going to El Salvador without restrictions would be so great that I don't think even the President's party would vote for it."

A crowd of committees and subcommittees in the Senate and House, each with slightly different concerns, have asserted jurisdiction over the diversion of the \$60 million. The committees have indicated they want certain assurances from the Administration before they will approve the funding. These include a reaffirmation by President Reagan that the number of American military advisers in El Salvador will not exceed the current ceiling of 55, an effort by the Administration to defend human rights, specifically through improvements in the Salvadoran judicial system, and a promise from the White House that it will work for unconditional discussions between the Salvadoran Government and the guerrillas.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, while on record in favor of negotiations in El Salvador, told Mr. Long's subcommittee last month, "We will not support negotiations that short-circuit the democratic process and carve up power behind the people's back." The bet-

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